

## Brecht in Pidgin: Oladipo Agboluaje's *Mother Courage* in Africa

Sam Kasule

University of Derby, Derby, UK.

### Abstract

African British performances and dramas mutually share their collective interest in the tempestuous afterlife of colonialism and post-independence and the different vibrations they carry into the present but in Africa's performance forms and the various cultural 'beats'. Regardless of their routes to Europe, Africans living in new national spaces of the diaspora yearn for Africa; hence, African British performances that emerge are caught between the longing to present Africa, which they left behind or one that is fading in their memories, and the diaspora with its pervasive pitiless demands. The interpretation of African British plays demands a more nuanced appreciation not only because of the multi-stranded and multi-voiced identities, but because they share a collective interest in the complex 'afterlife' following political independence of Africa from the colonialists to the present. Oladipo Agboluaje's *Mother Courage* demonstrates that theatrical presentation, informed by the African British playwrights' identification with the African continent reproduce local, transnational and/or trans-border dimensions. The essay traces the dialogue between Agboluaje's adaptation of Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage* and Brecht's original text, focusing on how the African playwright's travel between different 'worlds', across borders develops into a new web of ideas, characters, and words.

## Introduction

In *Mother Courage* (1999), Agboluaje, as an African British playwright who stands at the forefront of a critical theatre, demonstrates his vision of an African performance aesthetics founded on what Irobi has described as the “theory of Ase” (Irobi, 2009: 15). Irobi sees this theoretical framework as a “spiritual and ideological mechanism [that is used] to subvert a predominant European diasporic mainstream notion of theatre as a slice of realism, mere entertainment or fiction”. (2009:19). In this context, the discussion of Agboluaje’s *Mother Courage*’s critical theatre, which through its dramaturgy of shifting locations signifies the links between the diaspora and Africa, is even more intriguing; more particularly, its reconfiguration of African diasporan performance as central to the current developments and expansion of contemporary theatre and performance. I use the term critical theatre to refer to a performance that contests Western conservative and conventional performance in order to assert ‘other’ forms as a means of mediating the effects of Western theatre performance with elements drawn from African-centred performance aesthetics, history and politics. Agboluaje brings to his work an African critical self-consciousness that is not focused on staging conservative indigenous performances but drama that functions through this in-betweenness, or what Du Bois, the African American thinker, called “twoness” (2014 [1903],: 7), the signature of a new African world. In a way, he aims to deconstruct performance forms and/or texts inherited from both worlds, and critique contemporary local, national and international experiences. Inevitably, the effect of this practice is in exposing and disrupting the conjunction of the multiple performance

forms and thematic concerns while also preventing the Western form from taking precedence over the others. In fact, commenting on the production of *Mother Courage*, Agboluaje claims, “I thought a lot about African performance techniques but since the director was not familiar with indigenous performance modes, I decided to stay within the materialism of the play, with criticisms of religion as an opiate of the people, Ngugi-style.” (Interview on March 16, 2016)

### ***A Mother Courage of African Wars***

*Mother Courage*, first performed in 1999, which takes its inspiration from African post-independent wars, can be viewed as a dialogue with Africa’s crisis of conflicts of the 1990s, especially the Liberian, Sierra Leonean, and Rwandese internecine wars. Thus, the way it mirrors the wars is significant and cannot be overlooked especially how it relates to issues of identity, ethnicity, institutional and moral corruption in order to re-imagine the African landscapes of conflict. This adaptation, which literally brings together people from diverse ethnic communities and states - Nigerian, Cameroonians, Sierra Leoneans, French and Ghanaians; past and present (African) worlds, offers a challenging exploration of the impact of ethnicity and greed for superfluous wealth on the lives of people in West Africa. *Mother Courage* opens just as the Radio announcer is informing the audience that Field Marshal Jigawa, the Chief of Armed Forces of the West African Union of Independent States is preparing for “a counter-offensive against the rebel Dancing Hyenas Revolutionary Forces” (Agboluaje, 1999: 1). The first scene, “a bush path near a village” (1) is the starting point,

where the Sergeant searching for new conscripts mourns about the scarcity of men willing to join the campaign and even tries to rationalise the skewed objectives of the war. "It's simple maths. The nations that fought the First and Second World Wars are First and second World nations. We that did not fight any world war, we are Third World", he comments, linking Africa's underdevelopment to its incompetence. (1999: 1)

This conversation mentions the colonial wars, locating the importance of colonial and post-colonial history to the play and signifying its lasting consequence on people's lives; "The little wars we fight, we fight them the wrong way," the Sergeant informs us (1). This conversation between the Sergeant and the Recruiter underlines one of Agboluaje aim of adapting the play: "I decided to create a fictional West African war and use it as a commentary on the real wars and the local and global politics that caused these conflicts to occur with such depressing regularity." (2016) In this scene, when Sergeant meets and cross-examines Mother Courage to establish the identities of her children he is not only confused by their names that do not relate their ethnic identities through patrilineal descent but also their diverse biological origins. "You have a United Nations family," he comments (5). This comment sets the tone that defines the play's interest in issues of ethnic identity, race, and naming, and their relationship with history, and its criticism of place and space. In following different paths and creating different identifications of people from the same cultural region in

his drama, Agboluaje suggests that there are diverse ways of representing black people, and their wandering performance, on the British stage.<sup>1</sup>

### **Reconfiguring the play**

Shifting locations of European dramas through adaptations talk back to Africa from the diasporas or, use consciousness experience to reflect on the links between the diaspora and Africa is even more intriguing; more particularly, its reconfiguration of African diasporan performance as central to the current developments and expansion of contemporary theatre and performance. Agboluaje's interest here resonates with debates in African Canadian theatre; Rinaldo Walcott, an African Canadian critic has commented that their theatre, similar to other black diasporic performance, "is forged and performed within the context of a diasporic sensibility and/or consciousness." (2005: 80) Walcott further notes that the theatre "sits somewhere between addressing it's 'nationally local' contexts and [engages] in a much wider context." So, "that much wider context," he argues, "is the basis of what constitutes its diasporic aesthetics" (Walcott, 2005: 80). Whereas many people rarely notice this theatre, it has memorable scenes, themes and characters that show why it is worth noticing and watching. In performing whites as blacks, playing with ethnicity, language and post-colonial history, so that although they engage with European theatre's "roots and reach"

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<sup>1</sup> *Mother Courage* was literary transnational and the cast and crew included a Swedish-based English theatre actress and director of African descent and Guyanese origin, the main actress who is of Jamaican descent and performers of African descent from various nationalities.

(Lippard 1997: 37), the thematic concerns entangle us into urban British, and world issues and performative experiences so that in the process we realise new critical viewpoints. The central story focuses on the adventures of Bola Fagburu, a black Mother Courage, trader and owner of a *bolekaja*.<sup>2</sup> In one sense, the play inherits all the characters – Bola Fagburu aka Mother Courage, played by Carmen, her family, the soldiers, and others - themes, if not the locations from Brecht's play. Fagburu, a name that not only translates as a hustler in Yoruba language but also signifies women traders who use devious and wicked business practices especially exploiting innocent people, is critical to the play. The characteristics of Fagburu women are transferred to Mother Courage for, in this context, it signifies her unscrupulous business methods. In the process, while she is typical of the West African *bolekaja* women, naming her cart a "genetically modified"(Agboluaje, 1999: 2) mammy-wagon allows Agboluaje to draw on old meanings while allowing for new meanings. If Brecht's props, such as Mother Courage's cart, were alien to an African audience, the mammy-wagon seems easy to present in familiar contexts and is critical to the meaning of the play; it is associated with wooden body lorries, common during colonial times, and connected to the market women who used to own numerous numbers of these multi-purpose vehicles. Moving together with her three children from ethnically diverse

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<sup>2</sup> In the play, Agboluaje uses mammy-wagon instead of *bolekaja* to describe Mother Courage's wagon: 'I used Mammy Wagon instead of Bolekaja for 2 reasons. Since Mother Courage in the original pushes a wagon Mammy Wagon would not need translating to a British audience and Mammy Wagon can be translated into English as *Bolekaja*, and is used as such in non-Yoruba areas.'

backgrounds, Eket Messu-Essien (Eilif Nojocki) whose father was French, Opoku (Swiss Cheese), a name belonging to the Ga people of Ghana, Ngozi Enweren (Kattrin), *Mother Courage*, embeds herself with various armies and criss-crosses West African countries. *Mother Courage* is a percipient example of a Brechtian adaptation, for instance, other characters from the original include Ashewo Ajegunle<sup>3</sup> (Yvette), which translates as 'the prostitute of Ajegunle', a slum area of Lagos, General Mensah (General), the rebel Dancing Hyenas Revolutionary Forces, and Field Marshal Jigawa of the West Africa Union of Independent States.

Agboluaje's play is multi-layered and responds to the issues affecting black people irrespective of their location. It was in a similar context that African Canadian playwright, Sears, asserted that her writing "revolves around the process of understanding and exploring one's own African heritage and one's own Westness" (2009); most noticeably, the dynamic identity of the black residents of the diaspora gives it new memories and a new vibrancy thus their plays are almost palimpsestuous. Collectively, these comments underline that to read and understand the texts one requires a knowledge of both, African and African diasporic culture and history because they record all the voices from the past and the present; when you 'scratch' them all the voices come to the surface. *Mother Courage* explores this quality of layering, giving the play a cultural geographical quality and investing into it literary

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<sup>3</sup> 'Ashewo Ajegunle' is the name of a popular song: Ashewo Ajegunle / *Yakari* / Ashewo Ajegunle / *Yakari* / When I ask her for love / She say, 'Brother, I dey for college'. / Oh-oh / Oh-oh / Ashewo Ajegunle / *Yakari*

information about the discourse of identity, place, and location. Through the implied assertion that people need to know these things, Agboluaje gathers the history of West Africa and gives it a permanent home in the play. The African world is the creative source of the play's form and linguistic texture and it engages with the audience's local world and with the 'global' African context.

The playwright's development of the counter-narrative to mainstream theatre is informed by his consciousness of the resistance between mainstream theatre and African forms of physical performance and linguistic expression; the latter enables them to present their understanding of the reality of the diaspora. To a multicultural audience in British theatre, the performance may be the same but individually they may be watching different plays. Agboluaje has spoken of how he was inspired to write the play:

The idea of adapting *Mother Courage* came from Steven Luckie, the then producer of Eclipse Theatre. [...] The choice of adaptation was to secure their remit, which was to produce work to tour mid-scale venues in the region. [...] Steven [Scott] had seen my first play, *Early Morning*, the year before and thought I had the satirical sensibility to adapt *Mother Courage* in a way that would appeal to a popular audience. Because of the many stipulations by the Brecht estate, I was limited in how I could reimagine the story. I read a number of existing adaptations that the Brecht estate permitted to be published and found that they all closely followed the original story. (Agboluaje, 2016)



The problems of direct translations of European plays into African/Black British dramas are that they create a closed circle of meanings, simply repeating ideas and concepts, and images, without questioning and considering the new alternative audiences. Nonetheless, Agboluaje commenting on his adaptation has stated:

I thought a lot about African performance techniques but since the director was not familiar with indigenous performance modes, I decided to stay within the materialism of the play, with criticisms of religion as an opiate of the people, Ngugi-style [Ngugi wa Thiongo]. [...] The producers applied to the Brecht Estate to do a run in a London theatre. Permission was granted after the estate's lawyers demanded nine pages of cuts, thus reducing the production to the near equivalent of Brecht in blackface. (Agboluaje, 2016)

The directive by the Brecht Society suggests a general insistence on the preservation of Brecht's work in its unchanging form, and by extension, the European culture that it symbolises. However, in the context where the play is being relocated to Africa, it also implies an ambiguous relationship between 'mainstream' and 'side-stream' theatre<sup>4</sup> that underlines the African and European aesthetics mesh.

Throughout *Mother Courage*, as the playwright juggles with complex and disconcerting issues of war in post-independent Africa, boundaries are presented as complex and multifarious, contributing to Africa's problems. The interest in exploring

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<sup>4</sup> The idea of 'mainstream-sidestream' was proposed by Osita Okagbue at his inaugural lecture, "The Margin in the Centre: Of Diaspora, Betrayal and Homelessness," delivered at Goldsmiths University on 14 June 2016.

the local and the global, allows acts of examination of obscure facts that relate to the universal themes such as ethnic conflict and post-colonial Africa's internecine wars. In addition,, as in his other plays, the focus is its exposure of the complex state system where African people are trapped in a network of conflicts, violence, and exploitation, while political and institutional violence and selfish greed interlink. *Mother Courage* is in dialogue with the intra- / inter-ethnic strains of the late twentieth century when issues of politics and corruption reached a climax in former European colonies. The boundary crossings taking place here underline the complex nature of black British identities in the United Kingdom. Making connections across the boundaries demonstrates some of the ways in which black people sometimes share pain, disappointments, and hope; thus, *Mother Courage* insists on identifying ethnic difference across history as a way of opening up a dialogue of the notion of a singular Africanness/blackness. In one sense, the play is a recognition that movements - across local and national borders - triggered by these wars are central to the processes of writing an experience of Africanness and African Britishness that destabilises previous definitions of black identity. As Walcott suggests, certain presentations of Africanness/blackness "sets into motion different kinds of attachments to the nation"; consequently, what the nation "means to each character is very different and is open for debate among the characters in the play, as it is among the audience." (2005: 82) In a sense, this is an apt observation because while these Agboluaje's characters are Africans, each has a different historical attachment of the nation and each brings a different sensibility to what the nation means to him/her. These differences, which

make the audience question singular or collective multi-ethnic Africanness/blackness, and also destabilise the perception of identity, ethnicity, and multi-ethnic blackness resonate with the debate on forms of African (black) Britishness. Agboluaje demonstrates Africanness and Black Britishness by presenting a range of black characters whose differences render any suggestion of a singular blackness or black community impossible. This gives a different view of Africa and aesthetic a different.

It is not possible to read Agboluaje's *Mother Courage* and ignore its critique of the undergirding hardship and corruption that marked the conflicts within various post-independent African countries. For example, in her struggle to protect Ngozi, Mother Courage makes astute comments about patriarchy and the prevalent violence against women.

Mother Courage: [*To Ngozi*] Learn from her, Ngozi. Don't marry a soldier.

Love is God's free gift. Anything free is too good to be true. Even with us civilians love is risky. Because you're a woman you become the man's slave. Be grateful you can't talk. There'll be no quarrelling.... (Agboluaje, 1999: 20)

The susceptibility and physical insecurities give Mother Courage a moment to reflect critically on her life, the feckless nature of men, to warn her daughter as well as other women about women's vulnerable positions, and to reflect on the hopelessness of love. Agboluaje's dramatic evocation of a disintegrating Africa attempts a recreation and salvage of what the warring armies would not remember. Like Brecht, he focuses

on the decaying social conditions yet Mother Courage symbolises women who survive war.

*Two years later. Half the population of West Africa has died. Epidemic kills what is left by the slaughter. In the former flourishing country there is famine. We meet MOTHER COURAGE in the mountains with the Union Army. The harmattan is bitter. Business is very bad. COOK gets a letter from Monrovia and departs.*

(Agboluaje, 1999: 45)

Here, the economic, the military and humanity cannot be separated from one another, any more than the rejection of the landscape to be partitioned and enclosed by borders, which would prevent people from escaping the war.

### **Constructing Critical Landsapes**

Underlying this critical theatre is the ability to shock the audience, forcing them to question what they are watching – conflicting views on normative identity - and to discuss these after the performance. For, we do not go to watch Agboluaje's play for the definitive Brechtian experience but rather for a layered sequence of theatrical experiences that keep shifting between African and European styles. In one scene, when the Sergeant asks Mother Courage for her "particulars", Opoku, her son, asks, "Sergeant, you don't know her face? It's Mother Courage." In response, Sergeant, poking fun at foreign religious names states, "I've heard of women named Patience, Comfort – Incontinence, even." (2) When she informs him that Monrovia gave the name to her because she "broke through rebel lines to the Government sector during

a bombardment" (2) in order to save her fifty loaves of Ghana bread, he adamantly demands she give him her identity papers. Significantly, although she narrates the birth origins of her children, she defiantly rejects his attempts to essentialise their identity; their pasts, detached from race, are essentially personal narratives. Mother Courage's attempts to explain her children's multiple identity take place in Scene 1 where the Sergeant confronts her.

SERGEANT: (*Writes*) The Fagburu family.

MOTHER COURAGE: I am the only Fagburu here.

SERGEANT: Are these not your children?

MOTHER COURAGE: Ehen<sup>5</sup>? (*Pointing to EKET*) My eldest, there, is Eket

Messu-Essien. His father's a French mercenary. Francois was always telling Eket that he's an *assimilé*, a Franco-phoney. He wanted to name him Leopold. Sounded too Belgian for my liking. I was with a Calabar man then. I could have married Francois but he was driven out of Nigeria.

SERGEANT: Why?

MOTHER COURAGE: The frogs in our area disappeared. Our neighbours accused Francois of hunting them to make white man's juju. (*Points to her other children*) Anyway, they are birds of different feathers.

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<sup>5</sup> So?

SERGEANT: They all have different names? (*To OPOKU*) So your father's  
from Lapland, *abi*?

MOTHER COURAGE: From Ghana, by the name of Ajayi. Although  
everybody called him Charlie.

OPOKU *smiles and nods, likewise* NGOZI.

SERGEANT: If his father is Ghanaian, why in Eshu's name is he called  
Ajayi?

MOTHER COURAGE: Sergeant, I don't want to say it but it's obvious you  
did not do well in school. I was with my Yoruba countryman. The  
boy takes after him.

SERGEANT: How can the boy take after him when he's not his father?

MOTHER COURAGE: (*Crooks her finger*) Asking question. I call him  
Opoku. (*Points to NGOZI*) That's Ngozi Enwerem. She's half-Igbo.

SERGEANT: You have a United Nations' family.

MOTHER COURAGE: Yes, oh. My wagon and I have seen the world.

(Agboluaje, 1999: 4-5)

In a way, Mother Courage rejects as inadequate an ethnic identity that in her view attempts to describe her children as 'others'. Listening to her, one can assume that her subversion of the concepts of race and ethnicity is underlined by her strategy of socialising with men from multiple race and ethnic origins; and in addition, employing a system of naming that flouts African cultural systems and signifies a layering of multiple identities. Alternatively, one could argue that the play is

challenging restrictive constructions of mono-cultural or ethnocentric African British identity and history. *Mother Courage* is important because it focuses our attention on ethnic / race politics and insists that we develop that alternative view critical to the evaluation of our lives. Specifically for me, Agboluaje's play underlines the situation of African British playwrights within the United Kingdom, and challenges us to understand the importance of the challenges that migrants such as Mother Courage experience upon traversing the war ravaged countries and borders. What is interesting is her assertion, when clarifying the mixed identity of her children, that "they are birds of different feathers" (3); here, Mother Courage not only creates a dialogical relationship between her transgressions of normative sexual relationship but also highlights her "United Nations" (3) family as a metaphor for the today's hybrid African communities. Her imaginary of identities within a singular African identity works to affirm the presence of complex 'intra' post-colonial racial relationships that explain people differently that are explored in the play. In Agboluaje's *Mother Courage*, African and European ethnic identities and cultural styles do not clash, but mainly through Mother Courage's intervention, they intersect and interweave. Significantly, the presentation of this process allows the audience to engage with, and understand, the transformations of language and differences of politics. The multi-ethnic moments may be the source of tension and discomfort but the performance clearly shows that the power brokers are the source of the problem.

### **Agboluaje's boundary crossings**

An extended critical study of African performance/theatre shows how this theatre cannot be fixed since it continually recognises and takes into account how performance migrates and opens dialogues with other theatre cultures. As African theatre is practised outside Africa, its physical borders, as we witness in Agboluaje's *Mother Courage*, experience change. Further, it creates new forms, complex structures that collectively share common roots in Africa and its diaspora, and languages of performance that may not be recognised by people in the contexts where it develops. As a diasporan writer working between two theatrical traditions, Agboluaje links Brechtian and African forms, styles and ideas, signifying how the 'deciphered' object and its original overlap, and in the process generate new meanings. Moreover, the post-colonial perspective of the play warns us about the transfiguration, merging the new and old into a more contemporary drama. Within the play, through the character of Mother Courage, Agboluaje in a provocative way questions and confronts the audience, daring them to rethink how Western dramatic works are re-used/re-presented and received by audiences who have forked worldviews in the new British multi-cultural world. This experimentation with 'side-stream' theatrical codes in a play that also uses an 'other' English marks Agboluaje's development of critical drama in theatres where the total effect is for him to be an outsider – insider but writing and speaking in his own (English) tongue. The notion of the shifting location of the African/Black theatre is implicit here because the perception and aesthetics of performance are no longer fixed; they are continuously changing, as is ethnic, racial and national identity. Conversely, they are unable to describe themselves and they



cannot. And as McMaster writing about Native Americans and aboriginals living on reservations comments, "At the moment we can no longer define ourselves as this or that, we are now both and more." (1998: 20) *Mother Courage* does two things: first, it shows the post-independent African political system of megalomaniacs/tyranny in decay. Second, it projects a progressive, but not an idealistic vision of new inter-ethnic/multiracial/multicultural institutions. With Agboluaje's focus on political decay and internecine conflicts what comes into focus is his idea of Africa as a multi-ethnic world; African ethnicities and European races are mixed and intertwined within the play that linguistically Africanised / Pidgin English is standard. The characters speak in either Pidgin, Yoruba, blended with Standard English, languages (dialects) that allow them to express their views with clarity in communities within and outside Africa. The Black British writers such as Kwei-Armah render their plays in Blinglish, a blend of patois and English, which is shared by second and third generation urban black youths of African Caribbean origin in the United Kingdom. However, for Agboluaje, the linguistic expression that he writes with clarity in the play is a mixture of English with some African words that constitute the lingua franca of most West African communities, who are also resident in the African diaspora. This allows him to write a uniquely Africa drama that is relevant to African migrant communities. The decision to locate the action within Pidgin speaking communities is important not because it points to the modern attempts at recreating a region of culturally related states but because it underscores the point that the relationship between *Mother Courage* and the marauding armies constitutes a complex set of

relationships than the initial perception of a direct adaptation of Brecht's play might suggest. Moreover, the play's use of multiple nationalities and ethnicities, and its intentional Pidgin, various African languages and Standard English allows it to understand its post-coloniality. Pidgin signifies the notion of borderlessness, and movement between diverse cultural and ethnic identities. The emergence of Pidgin as a language of artistic expression within African British theatre represents a critical development, which not only contrasts it with other Black British theatre practices but also works to question the relationship between Standard English and the language spoken by formerly colonised and enslaved black people. Pidgin speaks to modern West African realities just as patois speaks to Caribbean realities; and both recall their past under European domination. In his own African-centred dramatic writing, Agboluaje settles on Pidgin. His appropriation of Pidgin with the aim of speaking first to the African audience starts from the assumption that *Mother Courage* cannot be appreciated simply as a drama form that could be examined in isolation since it is the political and historical issues that give it shape. The re-wording of the text into a more West African English language register demonstrates the ways in which Agboluaje actions his 'accentuation'; thus, while this *Mother Courage* remains a Western play, it is affected by the worldview of the writer/producer, and by extension, the performers. In this way, the play shows that performance travels and "dialogues" (Campbell, 2008: 113) with different cultures, forms, geographical locations, and audiences in Africa and its diaspora. In *Mother Courage*, where Agboluaje reworks and poaches the performance language of Brecht, creating new dialogues within existing frameworks

of Brechtian theatre, he constructs an African version that appears authentic but simultaneously has a particular artist quality, written in a way to underline its distinctive aesthetics or strands. This familiar style of Agboluaje's theatre, learned from a reflective understanding of African theatre styles, drama and linguistic expression, is what people in wartime continuously act. When reading *Mother Courage*, one notices how Agboluaje exposes the complex systematic greed for power and wealth, which have impacted the African experience since colonisation, and he links the audience to these practices. For example, in Scene 1, when Sergeant detects Mother Courage's vociferous attempts to prevent her son from joining the army he states, "Madam, a uniform is the quickest way to a Presidency. What kind of mother are you, denying your son the opportunity of becoming a Head of State?" (6) Viewing the play in this context validates its narrative, and helps to awaken other issues such as the politics of ethnicity and women's sexual exploitation; collectively, these issues frame the play. And perhaps there is no better representation of Agboluaje's cynical attitude to politicians, religion and war than the scene between the General, Chaplain and Eket.

EKET: Then we attacked. But we didn't realise the farmers had weapons.

[...] Before I knew it they knocked my machine gun from my hand.

I started reciting 'the Lord is my shepherd'.

GENERAL: After reciting Psalm 23, what did you do?

EKET: I started laughing.

GENERAL: You started laughing!

EKET: I was using brain for them. Once I convinced them I wasn't mad we started haggling. Then I said: 'Eh? Two hundred thousand francs for one cow is a crime against humanity. I will pay you one-fifty'. Bloody illiterates, while they were dazed by my audacity I dived for my machine gun and minced them. When you don't have a spade a plough will do.

GENERAL: Chaplain, what do you think of that?

CHAPLAIN: Literally speaking, there's no such saying in the Bible. But our Saviour did feed the five thousand, minus [those] who brought their own lunches. There was no civil war and no tribes forced to live together so he could ask people to love each other. Things have changed.

GENERAL: (*Laughs*) Indeed! You deserve a drink for that, prophet of Baal. [...] I hope you covered up their bodies. Anyway, the bible says, 'Whatever you do to the least of my children you do unto me'. And you gave them beef to go with their *gari* so that they may fight for regional unification and for God on the side.

EKET: That's why I picked up my machine-gun and blasted them to pieces. (Agboluaje, 1999: 11)

When will the warring factions take responsibility for their deeds? The present tyrannical systems represented by Chief of Armed Forces Field Marshal Jigawa and Field Marshal General Adolf Hammer (Scene 8) and General Mensah heading the

armies, are guarded by soldiers, such as Sergeant, Recruiter, Quarter Master, Older Soldier and Boy Soldier, Soldiers 1, and Soldier 2, who form part of the marauding packs of UN peace keepers and rebels. These resent peasants but demonstrate a passion for war, the military, and looting; the army uniform is the only route to power and wealth. In this way, Agboluaje uses his adaptation to reconstruct history as a framework that he uses to expose the abuse of power and humanity.

Apart from allusions to West African market women through the exploration and disentanglement of a classical legend, *Mother Courage*, there are resonances with African countries where political structures have become complex, and war, politics and corruption are intertwined like histories of the indigenous people who 'live there'. Some scenes open with a brief radio announcement updating the audience on the progress of the war. These diverse reports resonate with people familiar with civil wars and provide historically resonant threads of the stage action, extending the breadth of Agboluaje's critical message from a local to a universal setting. These announcements provide complexity to issues highlighted in the play, underscore his message, and accentuate several layers of the overarching narrative of the play. He surreptitiously associates the spectators with violence, his audiences with civic violence, highlights their connivance in it and unwittingly forces them to condemn it. Further, through the insertions of the Radio (VO) spokesman, Pidgin English, and non-European names, he draws us critically into the many interlaced layers of stories of contemporary warfare that are destroying the communities. At the beginning of Scene 2, Radio (VO) announces:

It's two years since Jigawa's conscription drive. The war shows no sign of ending. General Mensah of the West Africa Forces refutes accusations of genocide. Questions are being asked about Mensah's Operation Starve and Shoot. Mass graves are being discovered everywhere. Atrocities are being committed by both sides in this increasingly bloody war. (Agboluaje, 1999: 1)

Thus, if five different people watch *Mother Courage*, they will have five different stories about what really happened, and the significance it has today.

Indeed, just as Wole Soyinka focuses on the politically, morally and socially bankrupted African after colonialism, Agboluaje's dramas from the diaspora, specifically *Mother Courage*, breathing a new life into African theatre and performance, peek behind and beyond the 1990s political layers to construct a deeper understanding of the afterlife of post-colonialism's wars. From the first to the last scene, similar to the Brecht's original play, this *Mother Courage* is a carefully reworked drama, which is also self-consciously diasporic, and in a way more innovative and entertaining than we expect. The themes are presented not only through dialogue but also through songs whose comments are made relevant to the relocated action and place. Even Ashewo's (Yvette) outwardly innocuous "Song of the Fraternisation" (14), sung with a chorus, takes on a different meaning. It is a response to the war as well as a comment on the innocent victims of war, its collateral damage.

ASHEWO: I was young, of marrying age

The war was all the rage

Into town came the army  
They all wanted to get laid  
CHORUS: They said it was the policy  
Of their organisation  
Public relations of a sexual kind  
They called Fraternisation  
[....]  
They said it was the policy  
Of cross-pollination  
[....]  
One day they packed up and left  
Rules of engagement  
Became constructive estrangement  
God knows we girls did our best.  
(Agboluaje, 1999: 19)

Thematically, Mother Courage's 'Song of Great Capitulation' re-interpreted by Agboluaje is the most important song in the play. It is a reflection on the absurd cruelties of the war, which makes everyone a victim, hence Mother Courage's insightful comment questioning the success of any people's revolution "when even the revolutionaries obey the oppressors". (28) The song's poignant lyrics are ironic, particularly those that underline issues of violence, exploitation, and express the themes of the play.

MOTHER COURAGE: [...] How can there be revolution when even the revolutionaries obey the oppressors? [...] Like you, I accept our leaders' mediocrity. Business people don't complain. It spoils business....

[....]

The trader has to trade and so the chameleon dance.

Wash me, I wash you, and we'll both be clean. Why butt

My head against a brick wall?

[....]

And the town-crier sings

Your time is soon coming

You'll postpone your revolt

Once they open the vault

And drop a few pennies your way

Everything takes time

Yet death claims all

[....]

(Agboluaje, 1999: 35- 37)

Interestingly, Agboluaje invokes the iconic figure of the town crier into the song not only to insert subconsciously his critical self into the play but also to comment on Africa. While in pre-colonial Nigeria, the town-crier was a person who walked through the town and villages announcing the Chief's message to the people, today



critical post-colonial African writers have appropriated the role.<sup>1</sup> As one of the most significant contemporary strands of British theatre, African British drama is concerned with various issues including hybridity, politics, migration, gender and sexuality. Hence, in watching/reading the play one is interested to see how it negotiates the differences in the representation of these issues in its original context and adapted home. How does one watch/read a culturally different play? Some people may regard these hybrid cultures and languages of the play as from 'elsewhere', but the imbrications of migrant cultures and Eurocentric performance forms have become common in contemporary theatre. What Agboluaje tries to do is to capture the imaginary experiences as he encourages us to go back to rethink, to remember by engaging with wider issues to which he makes subtle references. The depth of the reference in this scene indicates an understanding of the tensions within post-colonial West Africa's complex and fragmentary history embedded at the heart of this drama where the aggregate effect of the *Mother Courage* is not linear since it allows the audience to engage with various inter-related issues.

## **Conclusion**

*Mother Courage*, a powerful examination of misogyny, violence, and parent-child relationships, can be situated within the discussion of Black British and African British theatre development of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century British theatre, focusing particularly on dialogue, language, music and song. It represents a new way of writing African/Black British dramas, discovering shared perspectives between

African and West European performance styles and thematic concerns in ways that inscribe it into black diasporic contexts. Agboluaje meta-theatrically inserts other voices and discourses into Brecht's *Mother Courage* privileging counter-discursive voices that develop with intensity from the beginning to the end; these create a tension between African and European forms of language as well as artistic and cultural expression. The play provides a voice for the victims of armed terror, and others whose relatives have been lured into the murderous practices, who demand justice from the governments. Ultimately, the interrogation of the imperial order is attained through what he describes as taking "some liberties in terms of being more playful especially with language, and not thinking about the play as an example of alienation effect" (2016). Ultimately, Agboluaje's position of re-accenting British theater marks the emergence of an African informed British theatre aesthetic underlined by a consciousness of the unremitting opposition between the Western theatre forms enforced on the colonised and the new forms/performance languages: they need to express themselves outside the colonial restrictions 'here'.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, in one poem, the Nigerian poet, Christopher Okigbo prophetically foretold his death during the Biafran (civil) War, in the political poem, 'Hurrah for Thunder' when he wrote, 'If I don't learn to shut my mouth I'll soon go to hell / I, Okigbo, town crier, together with my iron bell.' (in Adewala Maja-Pearce, 1990 [1969], p. 26)